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Foe in Laos Getting Supplies Over Chinese Road Network

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VIENTIANE — A Chinese road system in north Laos is playing a new role in sending supplies to North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces fighting near the Laos royal capital of Luang Prabang, well informed sources say.

These supplies, probably from China, are reaching the Lao town of Muong Sai 60 miles northwest of the royal capital, then moving along the latest Chinese road extension from Muong Sai east along the Nam Bac valley to the Ou River, then down to Communist forces north of Luang Prabang.

The Chinese have not yet put the finishing touches to Muong Sai-Nam Bac route which sources say they plan to asphalt, but there is a fair amount of activity in the area. Well informed sources say this is the first time the Chinese road system in Laos has been used as supply route to major Communist military action.

They say however the Chinese roads still are carrying only a fraction of the supplies the Communists need around Luang Prabang.

Security Measures

Most of the Chinese road's potential is still used to resupply builders and security units belonging to the Chinese themselves and to protect what is becoming an elaborate road network.

The network has four distinct parts; one from China proper to Muong Sai, the second from Muong Sai northeast to Dien Bien Phu in North Vietnam linking it with Hanoi's Route 19 at Muong Khoua, the third southwest from Muong Sai toward Pak Beng and Thailand, and the fourth and latest east from Muong Sai via the Nam Bac Valley onto Route 4 which runs all way to Luang Prabang.

There are anywhere from 3,000 to 14,000 Chinese on roads, depending which American officials one talks to.

The bulk of Communist supplies for the Luang Prabang fighting, however, still is coming from North Vietnam. This material, and reinforcements, are sent from Dien Bien Phu to Muong Khoua then south to a major supply base at Muong

Ngoi in Laos which is protected from U.S. bombing by caves and limestone cliffs.

From Muong Ngoi the supplies are transported down the Ou River to the Luang Prabang perimeter area.

The North Vietnamese have built up supplies in the Luang Prabang area, well informed military sources say. North Vietnamese killed and captured in the Luang Prabang area have been carrying the latest light-weight stock AK47 submachine-gun made in Czechoslovakia.

Pressure in North

North Laos now is talking the brunt of the North Vietnamese pressure, particularly at Luang Prabang and Ban Na to the southeast while there is almost no Hanoi pressure in South Laos.

Well informed sources believe this pattern of fighting is unusual for the Lao dry season, which usually sees the Communists attack the length of Laos and is the result of South Vietnam's incursion into south Laos.

In south Laos Hanoi troops are in the process of withdrawing positions around Muong Phalane on Route 9 west of Sepone.

During the Saigon incursion the North Vietnamese had moved west, taking Muong Phalane and pressuring government troops around Dong Hene.

Sources believe Hanoi planned a move west toward the Mekong River and deeper into Laos if the Saigon operation succeeded but when the North Vietnamese defeated the Saigon forces a Communist move west was no longer necessary.

However, Hanoi still faces the threat of further, and perhaps more successful, Saigon attacks into its Lao sanctuary.

Neutrality Desired

Therefore, Hanoi would like to re-establish a Lao neutrality to give its sanctuaries political protection against Saigon incursions, a ploy which worked from 1962 until the February incursion. Hanoi is, therefore, putting military pressure on north Laos either to force Laos to discuss a new neutrality package, which would give a pro-Communist neutralist faction a greater share in the Laos government, or through perhaps handing Laos a major defeat by taking

an important town such as Luang Prabang to force a right-wing takeover. This would give Hanoi an excellent excuse to openly attack Laos, replace the rightists with Lao leftists. To judge just which of these alternatives Hanoi is opting for, Luang Prabang probably is the place to watch. If the Communists only neutralize the airfield that could mean they want, as a first alternative, a new neutrality negotiated in Luang Prabang. If they take the town it could mean an outright attempt to dominate Laos and ensure that any future South Vietnamese incursion would face more difficulty.

Presently the North Vietnamese control most of the high ground north of Luang Prabang have driven the Lao forces back into the Mekong Valley area to within one mile of the airport.

China's new road system means she, too, could take a greater hand in Luang Prabang fighting to make political points, or if the United States interferes so far north.

Banna, on the edge of the Plain of Jars, is another flash-point in north Laos where the North Vietnamese consistently fire more than 100 rounds nightly into positions defended mostly by Thai troops. This week two outposts, Mike Echo and Mike Kelo, both less than 1,000 yards from the Ban Na perimeter have fallen. There were more than 50 casualties.

Guards Entrance

Ban Na guards the entrance to hills on the southern edge of the Plain of Jars protecting Long Chen, a U.S. and Meo base.

If Ban Na falls, as is quite likely according to military sources, the Communists will be able to invade Long Chen and perhaps create political effects similar to the taking of Luang Prabang, the Laos royal capital.

Already Long Chen receives daily pounding by Communist rockets almost to the point of monotony. Four civilians were killed there yesterday by Red gunners firing from Hill 1978.

A government force which tried to knock out that hill was hit by Communist mortar fire and took 80 casualties. The fact that Ban Na and Long Chen have held out this dry season is

ascribed to Thai reinforcements the Lao and Meos received in the area. Premier Souvanna Phouma says these Thais are from northeast Thailand and, therefore, are ethnic Lao.

"If they don't want to fight for us we send them home," he says.

The artillery units and some infantry Thai battalions are regulars in the Thai army, well informed American sources admit, and this use of Thais, if carried to great lengths in north Laos, always points to the danger of an increase in Chinese action in the north Laos theater. However, without these Thais it's doubtful if Long Chen would have survived until now.